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Speech by Fr. Francisco Fernandes
to the
United Nations Special Committee on Decolonisation

Subject: East Timor

New York

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Mr Chairman, distinguished delegates....

I wish to thank the Special Committee on Decolonisation for granting me the right to address the question of East Timor today.

I am an East Timorese. I am a Catholic Priest now living in Australia. I am a refugee from my own country. I speak today for some ten thousand East Timorese now living in Australia - most of whom are there precisely because of the Indonesian invasion and occupation of their land.

I have the honour to address to this Committee a view on East Timor from the largest group of East Timorese outside the country of their birth.

Mr Chairman, distinguished delegates...

The very fact that some ten thousand East Timorese have fled their country to an uncertain future in another country is evidence that all has not been well inside East Timor as the Government of Indonesia has been claiming for the past ten years.

The fact that East Timorese are still trying to get out is proof that the issue is still far from settled.

Never in the four hundred years of our history as a colony of Portugal did East Timorese put so much at risk by attempting to flee their country on such a scale.

Many East Timorese who left East Timor during the short civil war in my country in August 1975 would have returned were it not for the illegal and unjustifiable Indonesian invasion in December 1975.

Since that invasion, many more East Timorese have fled the country. Few have wanted to return, even if that was possible.

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While some East Timorese have gained their exit from our war-torn country through inter-Governmental agreements or through International Red Cross, a great number have had to leave through the subterfuge of false identities and payments to corrupt Indonesian army officers.

Such conditions of departure from East Timor persist to this day. The continued reluctance of the Government of Indonesia to permit exit from East Timor is just one part of its strategy of isolating East Timor - of keeping secret what is happening in the territory.

The Government of Indonesia claims that East Timor has been opened up to foreign journalists and diplomats. This is a smokescreen.

Many East Timorese have seen the preparations that go on before the visits of foreign dignitaries to East Timor:

- the arrest or removal of people who might contact visitors and give them the true story - as happened in Dili and Baucau before the so-called "celebration" of ten years of integration in July this year.

- the relocation of Indonesian army units so that they are out of sight of the visitors.

These things are well known to all East Timorese.

Of equal, if not greater importance, is the fact that there are few opportunities for visitors from outside to determine the knowledge, views, fears and aspirations of ordinary East Timorese.

No-one who visits East Timor for a couple of days and spends an hour or two in a few centres in the presence of Indonesian officials will hear what the people really think or believe.

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All East Timorese who live under Indonesian control know that once those foreign dignitaries leave East Timor, the Indonesian military will resume its arrogant ways. Anyone who speaks to foreigners will be suspect. In these circumstances, most East Timorese choose to remain silent.

There are a few honourable overseas visitors who recognise this problem and try to find other ways of looking behind the facade of sealed roads, alleged budget statistics, building construction and school attendance figures. These few people have looked into the faces and eyes of our people.

One such visitor, a West German member of Parliament who visited our country last year, reflected with great accuracy on the real East Timor.

He said, and I quote:

> The overall impression throughout the entire island is a place in captivity. The people never smile.
>
> Here in East Timor, the people look stern, bitter, hostile and numb.

Mr Chairman, distinguished delegates....

East Timorese now living in Australia count themselves as being very lucky.

Arrival in Australia means we no longer have to face the constant fear and uncertainties which are an integral part of life in East Timor. As well as this, most East Timorese in Australia are comparatively, economically secure.

But most of us still feel we are in some sort of a vacuum. Most of us are not able to simply forget our origins and completely immerse ourselves in our adopted country.

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Even though many of us have adopted Australian citizenship, we cannot escape from our experience or our knowledge of what is happening to our people inside East Timor.

WE cannot escape from the fact that while we are outside the country, many inside keep alive the aspirations of all East Timorese by actively resisting the annexation.

Nor can we escape from the pleading letters smuggled out of East Timor which ask us for help and demand from us a commitment to find ways to give voice to the suffering inside.

Mr Chairman, distinguished delegates....

This is why I have been asked by East Timorese in Australia to come here today:

- To give voice to East Timorese inside East Timor who are not free to speak;

- To tell you that East Timorese in East Timor do not accept their forced integration into the Republic of Indonesia;

- To help you understand that while we, as a people, are denied our most fundamental right - that of determining our own destiny - the issue of East Timor will not go away.

Other petitioners here today will inform this Committee of the facts and figures of the invasion and occupation of East Timor. On behalf of East Timorese in Australia who have recently escaped from the territory or who have received letters from relatives inside, I want simply to express to you what we, as a people, feel.

We, the East Timorese, feel we are in danger of extinction.

We believe that some two hundred thousand East Timorese have died

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since the invasion of East Timor. While it is impossible to provide an accurate figure, this belief is derived from our knowledge of the scale of death and destruction in the early days of the invasion and during the massive military operations and consequent famine in 1978 and 1979.

Distinguished delegates should be aware that official Indonesian census figures in 1980 indicated that at least one hundred thousand East Timorese could not be accounted for.

Mr Chairman, distinguished delegates...

East Timor is now on the Indonesian Government's official list of Transmigration areas. East Timor is designated as an area to receive poor families from overcrowded parts of Indonesia. Already, farmers from Bali have been moved into some of East Timor's best agricultural land.

But at the same time, the Indonesian Government is claiming that there is an over-population problem in East Timor !

To solve this alleged problem, the Indonesian Government is conducting an aggressive birth control program in our country. It has opened, with World Bank support, a birth control clinic in Dili. East Timorese claim that some women have received injections which, unknown to them at the time, have led to long-term infertility.

East Timorese have every reason to believe that the Government of Indonesia - after killing so many of us and then forcing us into birth control programmes - is committed to a genocide of us as a people.

That is how we feel.

But it is not only our physical survival which is being attacked.

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My courageous fellow religious inside East Timor reflected on this in a document last year. They said:

> There is a Timorese culture that is made up of words, attitudes, emotions, reactions, behaviour, ways of being and seeing the world. It is in these things that the people recognize their own culture, and in it, their own identity. They take pride in it and feel security in this background to their own future.
>
> The attempt to Indonesianise the Timorese people through powerful Pancasila campaigns, schooling and media, by divorcing the people from their own world view, represents a slow assassination of Timorese culture. To kill the culture is to kill the people themselves.

Mr Chairman, distinguished delegates....

The experience of East Timorese under Indonesian occupation and the fear that we are in danger of extinction means that we cannot trust the Indonesian Government to represent or to serve our best interests.

This experience means that East Timorese have to continue to fight and to say "NO" to the annexation.

This experience explains why the issue of East Timor has not gone away as the Indonesian Government and its diplomatic supporters had hoped.

East Timorese are not anti-Indonesian. Through our experience we understand very well what the Indonesian people also have to endure.

What we remain opposed to is the arrogant use of military power by the Indonesian Government to achieve its political aims.

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We oppose this not only because of the suffering this causes for the East Timorese inside East Timor but because, ultimately, it is counter-productive for everyone.

The Government of Indonesia claimed it had to invade East Timor in the interests of stability and peace. Not only did this false claim damage Jakarta's credibility, but the invasion actually increased instability by increasing uncertainties in the immediate region.

Mr Chairman, distinguished delegates...

Any East Timorese appearing at an international discussion on East Timor is aware that he might be putting in danger any surviving relatives still inside East Timor.

If we did not feel that there was some possibility of achieving something positive by petitioning this Special Committee of the United Nations, we would not take the risk of appearing here.

So, my appearance here is done with great reluctance and fear, but it is driven by the deepest hope that the United Nations will be persuaded to keep this issue on its agenda and keep open the chance for a just solution to the ongoing tragedy of my people.

All East Timorese are aware that to this date, the Government of Indonesia has rejected successive United Nations General Assembly and Security Council Resolutions calling on Jakarta to respect the right of the East Timorese to self-determination.

Of more surprise and greater concern to us has been the increasing numbers of Governments which have, since 1975, decided to vote with Indonesia on this issue or abstain from voting.

Such decisions by Member States, committed to the United Nations Charter, are a continuing source of bitterness for the East Timorese.

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Nothing has changed in the minds of the East Timorese concerning their attitude to the annexation of their country.

WE have not been properly consulted about our own future.

We have been forced to join another country through the force of arms.

Nothing has happened which legitimizes the illegal invasion and occupation of our country.

There is no just reason for declining support at the United Nations for our right to self-determination.

A genuine, internationally supervised act of self-determination, in the absence of armed coercion, is the only way to resolve the question about East Timor's future.

Acceding to diplomatic pressure from the Indonesian Government or its supporters to remove this issue from the United Nations agenda will serve no-one's interests.

The war in East Timor will continue - bringing further suffering to the East Timorese people and further economic, political and diplomatic difficulties for the Indonesian Government.

The failure of the United Nations to insist on the continued right of the East Timorese to self determination will effectively legitimize what is illegal, endorse the principle of the use of force to achieve aims and will increase the already widespread cynicism about the intentions and effectiveness of the United Nations itself.

Mr Chairman, distinguished delegates.....

The United Nations still does offer a means of achieving a just solution for a small and isolated people. Member States of the

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United Nations not only have the right, but they have the responsibility to ensure that all these available means are properly pursued.

Everyone knows that the Government of Indonesia has been arrogant in its rejection of United Nations resolutions. However, Jakarta's strong diplomatic campaign over the last ten years to have this issue removed from the United Nations agenda is proof that the Indonesian Government is highly sensitive to international opinion.

Instead of giving in to Jakarta's apparent intransigence, Member States should recognise this sensitivity and use it to urge the Indonesian Government to right the wrong for which it alone is responsible.

In the interests of the East Timorese people, in the interests of the Indonesian people and the Indonesian Government itself, in the interests of the very credibility of the United Nations, I, as an East Timorese appeal to all Member States to insist on our continued right to self-determination.

As an East Timorese, I place before you our hope that you will defend our right to survive as a people.

Thank you.

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